

H2O: A Summer's Tail

by Jeune Ecrivain

Category: H2O: Just Add Water

Genre: Humor, Romance

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2011-07-12 04:51:18

Updated: 2011-11-01 09:07:46

Packaged: 2016-04-26 12:47:42

Rating: T

Chapters: 4

Words: 9,517

Publisher: [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

Summary: Yet another interpretation of season 4. Ash and Emma return, Zane still wants Rikki back, and a mishap at Mako Island radically alters the lives of two members of the Mermaid Club.

## 1. Chapter 1

**H2O: A Summer's Tail**

**><strong>By Jeune Ecrivain**

**>Rating: T<strong>**

**\*\*Summary:** Ash and Emma return to save Rikki's from bankruptcy. The mermaid trio becomes a quartet as Emma and Bella finally meet, and college plans get underway. Meanwhile, Will quickly becomes a sort of big-brother figure to Elliot, and Zane renews his attempts to win Rikki back. To top it off, a mishap at Mako Island will have major ramifications.\*\*

**\*\*A/N:** The idea to write my own vision of season 4 has been festering in my mind ever since I discovered H2O on YouTube a few weeks ago and watched the entire series on my computer (just in time too, 'cause shortly after I finished, the infamous Copyright Gestapo nailed the uploader). Anyway, please feel free to offer constructive critique, especially since I'm a tad concerned about getting OOC.\*\*

"So, you said you had a surprise for me?"

Ash Dove chuckled at his girlfriend's characteristic impatience as he tossed the last of her and her younger brother Elliot's luggage into the trunk of his Sedan. "All in good time, Em."

Emma Gilbert scrutinized him over the hood of the car as they made the short trip to their respective seats and climbed in, with Ash claiming the steering wheel. "Fine," she said with a roll of her eyes. "It'd better be good, though."

Ash smirked and shook his head. The petite blonde was as stubborn as he was. That was one of the main reasons he was attracted to her, though he would never admit it to her face. Turning on the ignition, he opted to play the distraction game. He directed his voice at the 12-year-old behind him. "So, Elliot, why exactly did you want to tag along with your sister on the early flight home? When she called and told me she'd be flying in a week ahead of your parents to surprise her friends, I didn't think you were coming too until she told me in a quick follow-up call." He did not even have to look at Emma to know that she was giving him an impish look that made her awareness of his ploy all too clear.

"I just mentioned how I kind of miss the stables, and she offered to take me along," the younger boy. "I kind of think she was hoping to have someone there in case some stewardess spilled some water on her and she had a panic attack or something. Hydrophobia is so weird!"

As the airport receded behind him, Ash let his eyes meet Emma's, which silently confirmed her sibling's suspicions. Giving the slightest nod of understanding, he cleared his throat and turned his gaze back to the road. "Well, you know, your sister had quite a traumatic experience getting lost on Mako Island that one time. I guess something like that just leaves a mark, you know?"

"Yeah, I guess."

Although the ever-loyal Elliot had accepted his sister's compulsive fear of water, his lingering disappointment at having his relationship with the former swimming champion irrevocably altered still made itself known occasionally. Ash recognized the fleeting tinge of guilt as he glanced at his girlfriend's face. For a prolonged instant, her gaze remained fixed on the road ahead, and he realized that the direction which his attempt at playful distraction had taken was not as fun as he had anticipated.

A year ago, the sense that Emma was hiding something important from him had built to the point that he could no longer contain it. With each date, he had grown more attached to her confidence, wit, and perfectionism. Yet strange shifts in behavior and secretive meetings with her friends had escalated into the downright bizarre: girls floating in mid-air and water defying gravity. When he gave her his reluctant ultimatum, he was already primed to believe in something supernatural simply due to the impossible events that he had witnessed. That is why, when a nervous and vulnerable Emma finally led him to the beach and revealed her fishy secret to him, he had reacted with far less shock than one might expect from a guy having discovered that his girlfriend was a mermaid.

He remembered with perfect clarity the worried, apologetic look she had ventured to give him as her lionfish-orange tailfins swished in the surf. That single expression spoke volumes about the leap of faith she had taken, and he was struck by the trust that such a move implied. Leaps of faith were not her style, after all. Among what he had quickly thereafter learned was actually a trio of mermaids composed of Emma and her two best friends, she had been the most insistent on secrecy at the onset of their transformation. This did not surprise him, but when subsequent conversation revealed that she had also been the only one to volunteer the information to her boyfriend (the other two male confidants had found out by accident),

the irony did not escape him. He knew then that he would never betray her confidence.

He was brought out of his reminisces by a distinctive ring from Emma's cell phone, which she snatched from her hip and pressed to her ear. "Hey, Cleo," she greeted, smirking at the thought that her brunette friend was not expecting to see her again for another week.

"Emma!" cried Cleo Sertori gleefully. "Seriously, can't you turbo-swim across the Pacific or something! It feels like the closer we get to your homecoming, the more we miss you! We're starting to get restless and edgy! Well, except for Bella and Will, but they don't count, 'cause they don't know you yet. Even Rikki's starting to crack, in her own way."

Emma's laugh put a smile on Ash's face. "What'd she do?"

"She's actually moping a little! You and I both know Rikki does not mope! She broods like a pro, but she never mopes."

"It's sad, but it's true," confirmed the wry voice of Rikki Chadwick, signaling that speaker-phone was activated.

"You see! She admitted it! You've got to come home, Emma!"

"Yeah," interjected a male voice. "Maybe then, these guys will be too busy with you to tease me about my speech!"

Emma scrunched her face in confusion at the distinctly-accented intruder. "Who's the Steve Irwin wannabe?"

The response was a round of hysterical laughter. "Believe it or not, that was Lewis," Cleo managed to answer between giggles. "He's overcompensating again."

"Overcompensating for what?"

"You mean we didn't tell you?" marveled Rikki before turning her attention to Cleo. "He's been back for a whole week now! How could we not have mentioned it?"

"Mentioned what?" demanded an impatient Emma.

Cleo guffawed anew and explained. "Let's just say that Lewis spent a bit too much time in the States and brought a little something back. Lewis, drop that ridiculous Crocodile Dundee impression and talk like a normal person!"

"Fine," Lewis McCartney conceded, "but I don't see what the big deal is. I talked plenty at the graduation party, and only three people asked me how long I'd be visiting."

Emma snickered. "Only three? Is that all? Lewis, I hate to break it to you, but you sound like a total Yank!"

"Damn."

"Don't worry," teased the blonde in transit. "Some Aussie girls might find it sexy."

"Emma!" cried a betrayed Cleo. "Don't put ideas into his head!"

"Oh, please!" scoffed Rikki. "Lewis is so whipped he's only got eyes for you! If anyone's got anything to worry about, it's Lewis." She addressed the guy in question. "She's probably told you all about Ryan, but did she happen to mention how hot he is?"

"Rikki!"

Emma could practically see her ever-tactless friend shrug. "Hey, I'm bored. But hey, if it makes you feel any better, Will and Bella are pretty close to ousting you two as the King and Queen of Cheese. They just celebrated their friggin' month-iversary, for cryin' out loud!"

"I think it's sweet," Cleo countered. "Anyway, Em, I can't wait for you to meet Bella! And Will too! He looks so much like an older Elliot, its freaky sometimes!"

"I'm looking forward to it," Emma chuckled.

Ash half-smiled and half-smirked at the spark in her eyes as she indulged in further raillery that extended for a fair proportion of the trip to Gold Coast. For his part, Elliot passed the time launching infuriated birds at egg-stealing pigs on his iPhone.

Consequently, it did not seem long before their surroundings were beginning to look very familiar. Upon realizing their proximity to home, Ash cleared his throat. "So, what was globetrotting like?"

Emma smiled. "Tiring, actually. It's a long story. A fun one, but still lengthy, and right now, I just want to get home."

Ash smirked. "Fair enough. Look in the glove compartment."

She blinked. "What?"

"Don't tell me you forgot about your surprise already?"

She squeaked in realization and promptly did as she was told. She furrowed her brow as she withdrew a neatly bound folder.

"That, young lady, is the take-home final exam for my management class, and I don't mind telling you it fetched me my highest marks yet."

She scowled. "My big surprise is...your homework?"

He smirked. "Yep. I had to pull together a full-fledged investment proposal for a hypothetical business venture. It had to be good enough to present to actual bankers, and mine passed the test with flying colors!"

"Your modesty is inspiring. Really."

"It is, isn't it?" He bit back a chuckle at Emma's exasperated sigh. "As it turns out, though, I had a hidden agenda that I neglected to

tell my professor about until after he'd graded it. Fortunately, he was actually rather pleased about it."

"You? Hidden agenda? Never!"

"I know. It's a shocker. You see, that 'hypothetical business venture' wasn't so hypothetical after all. I'm sure the girls have kept you up to speed about the café going belly-up, right?"

She narrowed her eyes. "What did you do?"

Ash returned her suspicious gaze with a smug smile. "Oh, nothing. Just got myself a loan to buy out Rikki's fair and square."

Even as her jaw dropped, the hint of a smile remained at the corners of her mouth.

Ash dropped the charade now and spoke with sincerity. "I know how much that place means to both of us, and I knew if we let just any random guy take over, it just wouldn't be the same. You know? So I decided to see if I could stop that from happening. And it worked!" He indulged in a full-blown grin as he squeezed the steering wheel in triumph.

Emma shook her head in joyful awe. "Ash, this is amazing! But what about school? You still have a ways to go before you get your degree. Are you really going to have time to run a café?"

"That's the beauty of it. I won't be running it, at least not on a day-to-day basis. My first act as the new owner is to hire the prettiest girl I know as manager!"

Emma arched her eyebrows. "Me?"

Ash rolled his eyes. "No. The supermodel I've been seeing behind your back. Her name's Kahlan." He chuckled warmly at the shock etched on his partner's face. "Of course you!"

"But...I have college, too," she stammered despite her obvious elation.

Ash nodded. "Yes, you do, which is why we have the entire summer to find an assistant manager who can run the place during the school term."

She gave him a thoughtful look. "You've really thought this out, haven't you?"

"Yep. I kind of had to. There's a whole section in my proposal on where the old owner went wrong and what I'm planning to do differently."

Emma smirked. "So you basically got to write a dissertation on why Zane Bennett is a moron?"

"Yep. Not quite as fun as you'd think, 'cause I had to keep the personal stuff out, but still..." The devious glint in his eye said it all.

A moment passed before Emma let out a nervous chuckle and shook her

head again in awe. "Thank you, Ash. Really. I don't know how to thank you enough right now."

"Well, I have a few ideas, but besides distracting me from driving, some of them might gross out Elliot."

"Ash!"

**\*\*The whole Lewis'-American-accent thing was inspired by something that actually happened to me when I was a kid. I spent the better part of a day talking with a British family and found myself taking on hints of their accent towards the end. If one day does that, you can well imagine what an entire school term might do. I know Lewis didn't talk any differently in the season 3 finale, but he had so few lines that I figured I could get away with it.\*\***

## 2. Chapter 2

**\*\*H2O: A Summer's Tail**

**><strong>\*\*By Jeune Ecrivain**

**>Rating: T<br>Chapter 2\*\***

Rikki's Caf  , formerly known as the Juicenet, had been closed for approximately a week, and the youth of Gold Coast were already growing apprehensive about the fate of their favorite hang-out. More than one passing comment had been made about the possibility of the popular juice bar becoming one of those ill-fated local businesses trapped in a cycle of buy-outs and sell-outs. Zane Bennett, until recently the owner and co-manager with his ex-girlfriend Rikki Chadwick, knew how important the restaurant was to the community because he himself had been one of its boisterous teenage patrons not so long ago.

So he had inwardly jumped at the chance to pass the proverbial torch to an acquaintance just a year or two older than him who had himself established roots in Gold Coast and knew the place well enough to preserve its character. Still, the thought of Ash brought a ĩslight frown to his face. Zane's father was a successful entrepreneur. Business was in his blood. So what did College Boy have that he didn't? Perhaps what he was really bitter about was not so much Ash's managerial finesse (although he much preferred the term "one-upmanship") as the seeming ease with which he had weaseled his way into the close-knit group composed of Rikki, her friends Emma, Cleo, and Bella, and those trusted with their mermaid secrets.

Then, Bella's boyfriend had also wormed his way into the Mermaid Club, and Zane found it harder to repress his resentment the second time around. Both Will and Ash insisted that it had not been that easy by any means. The latter even claimed that it had almost cost him his relationship with Emma. Considering that Zane actually had lost his girlfriend due in part to his apparently souring attitude and wounded ego, he had trouble sympathizing. Still, Rikki meant enough to him that their break up had left him with a nagging compulsion to re-examine his outlook despite his own raging pride.

Thus it was with very mixed feelings that he found himself in an empty Rikki's Caf   on an otherwise lazy afternoon making last-minute preparations for the transfer of ownership. Personal matters aside,

he wanted the restaurant he and Rikki had rebuilt together to resume with a running start. He had reorganized the freezer and was now replacing a recently defunct light bulb that hung inconspicuously above the bar. As it clicked into place, a knock sounded at the front door. Wiping his brow, Zane descended the rusting step-ladder he had brought with him, made the familiar trek to the entrance, and swung one of the twin doors open.

Bella Hartley stood with her hands in her pockets while Will Benjamin peeked over her shoulder in idle curiosity. "Hey, Zane," she said. "Word's gotten out that you sold the café, and the girls are wondering if you know anything about the new owner."

Will flashed a crooked smile. "I think they're just worried that he's going to totally remake the place or something, 'cause that would totally bum them out."

"Well, can you blame us?" Bella chuckled. "You and I have only been here for one semester, and we already have some fond memories here. Who knows how many the others have!"

Will shrugged. "Can't argue that."

Zane nodded and gave a slight smirk, viewing the exchange as an opportunity to show that he hadn't just capitulated to the highest bidder. "Actually, the new owner is a guy who used to work here named Ash."

"Ash?" Bella repeated. "As in Emma's boyfriend, the stable boy?"

"The very same." Zane stepped aside and let his companions' curiosity draw them in, which it did immediately. "He came to me a couple of weeks ago and made an offer. I wasn't counting on being able to sell it to someone who actually had a history with the place, so it seemed too good to pass up. We hashed out a deal pretty fast."

"Where'd he get the money?" asked a quizzical Will.

"Apparently, he convinced the bank to take him up on a venture loan or something."

"Wasn't he the manager before?" asked Bella, mentally reviewing what Cleo and Rikki had told her about Ash.

"Yeah," confirmed Zane. "In fact, that's probably how he and Emma got together. They actually met at the stable where her little brother went for horseback riding lessons, but they didn't really spend a great deal of time together until he came to the JuiceNet."

"Cool!" chimed Bella. "I have to confess, though, I did come for a reason. I was wondering what's going to happen to the band, you know, with the new owner and all. Cleo and Rikki told me they never had live music when Ash and Emma were here."

He shrugged. "You'll have to ask him that, but I don't see any reason he'd cut you off. In fact, he should be here shortly. I'm meeting him to hand over the keys and get him oriented." A sigh accentuated the finality of his words. "The end of an era, I guess."

No one seemed sure if he was referring more to the era of Rikki's Caf  or to the era of Rikki herself. Will cleared his throat. "So, what are you going to do with yourself now? Your ol' man sending you to college?"

Zane shook his head. "He wants me to stand on my own two feet, and shockingly, I can't say I blame him. To get the ball rolling, I actually still have a job here as a waiter. One of the conditions of sale."

"So, you start off as the owner and end up a waiter. I'm no expert, and you're the one who comes from a business family, so correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't the goal to move UP?"

"Will..." Bella admonished despite the amused twinkle in her eye. "Be nice."

"Ah, you know I'm just ribbin' you, mate," chuckled Will, his smug smile turning sincere. "I know we've had our differences, but I actually respect you for trying to make it on your own."

Zane's glare faded, and he nodded again in silent acknowledgement as the sounds of a car door opening and closing sounded from outside. "Speak of the devil..."

Bella and Will turned their heads, saw a parked Sedan through the window, and watched. Not only did a dark-haired man emerge from the car, but so did a blonde girl with her hair pulled into a neat ponytail and a younger boy with blonde curls.

"He brought Emma and her kid brother," observed the former restaurateur in mild surprise. "Strange. I thought she wasn't due back for another week." He leaned against the doorframe and let his eyes meet Ash's as he and his two companions reached the entrance, a half-polite/half-sincere smile gracing his face. "Welcome back, mate."

Ash grinned as he led Emma and Elliot into what was now his caf . "Great to be here! Summer never does seem to come fast enough, does it?"

"No argument there." Zane rolled his eyes in genuine agreement before turning to Emma. "We weren't expecting you for another week. To what do we owe the pleasure?"

Emma smiled. "I decided to hop an early flight home to surprise the girls. They're not here, are they?" She scanned her surroundings anxiously.

Zane shook his head. "Nope. It's just me, Will, and Bella." He pointed to each of them sideways with his thumb. "Guys, this is Emma, Ash, and..." He drew a blank.

"Elliot," the younger male supplied. "Hi."

Bella shook each of their hands with characteristic cheer. "Hi! So great to finally meet you! Cleo and Rikki talk about you all the time!" she said while Will finished his own round of handshakes.



"You too! It's great to meet you in person after everything I've heard!" Emma replied with a sincere smile. "And Will!" She shook her head in awe of said male. "Wow! Cleo and Rikki weren't kidding, were they? Another five years or so, and I might actually have trouble telling you and Elliott apart!"

Will laughed, partially to conceal a mild blush. "I know! Rikki and Cleo noticed it out of the blue about a couple months ago, and they still bring it up every now and then!"

Elliott scrutinized his supposed doppelganger. "We don't look that much alike."

"Actually, you do," Bella teased as she looked at each of the two blonde males from various angles. "Cleo and Rikki knew what they were talking about!"

"Sorry, mate. There's definitely a resemblance there," Ash contributed with a chuckle before turning his attention to a visual survey of the establishment. "I gotta admit, Zane, I like what you've done with the place."

"Thanks, man," his predecessor nodded. "You should probably know we got new controls for the freezer. I can show you if you like."

"Fine by me."

Emma, Bella, Will, and Elliott hardly noticed their comrades' departure. "Anyway, Elliott, you two do have something in common. Cleo and Rikki told me Will's a free-diver. In fact, I heard he won the national championship!"

Will's interest was piqued. "You into free-diving?"

"Well, not diving really, but I am thinking about joining the swim team at my school," answered Elliott.

The older boy nodded. "That's cool. How'd you get into it?"

"He's hoping to outdo his big sister," Emma interjected, throwing her sibling an impish glare. "I used to be on the team, and I got pretty good at it."

"She was a champ," her brother clarified. "I figure someone has to pick up where she left off."

"Can't let a reputation like that go to waste," Will concurred.

"Right. So, what is free-diving anyway?" inquired Elliott.

"Basically, it's diving as deep as you can with nothing but a mask and a mono-fin. It's really great! You learn how to slow your heart rate so you can hold your breath for a really long time and also how to swim more efficiently so you don't use up too much oxygen on the way down."

"What's a mono-fin?"

Will bit back a laugh and slipped his arm around the shorter youth's shoulder. "Okay, dude, if you're going to be a champion swimmer or diver, there are a few things you have simply got to know!"

Bella only had a brief moment to be amused at the exchange between the blond quasi-twins before Emma pulled her aside, letting the boys drift off into the intricacies of diving. "So let me get this straight. You've been a mermaid for longer than Cleo, Rikki, and I put together?"

The more wavy-haired blonde laughed. "You could say that. When I first told them when I turned, they seemed to get a little self-conscious about the fact that it'd only been two years for them, but I got the truth out of Lewis soon enough."

"Wow! We had a hard enough time coping with it at sixteen but you were nine, for cryin' out loud! And there weren't any other mermaids in Ireland to share it with, were there?"

Bella sighed, recalling the loneliness that had often plagued her before moving to Australia. "Not that I knew of, and if there were, I sure wish I'd known, 'cause that would've made it a whole lot easier!"

Emma gave her a sympathetic look, her eyes bearing into her fellow mermaid's. "It must have been hard."

"It was definitely an adjustment, to say the least, but by the time I had a decent grip on everything, it had sort of become a part of who I was."

"What about the full moon? How the hell did you ever survive that every month for eight years?"

"It took me a couple times to figure out that the moon was even the reason for the whole thing. The first time, I woke up floating on my back in my moonpool with no memory of how I got there. I could only guess that I'd sleepwalked there in the middle of the night. My parents freaked out, the police went out searching, and it was a whole big mess. I was grounded for a month! That was also when I got my gelatinizing power, by the way. I first noticed it later on the following day." Emma nodded in understanding. "The second time, when I was eleven, I woke up in the woods close to the moonpool and managed to get back home before my parents panicked again. They did catch me sneaking in, though, and grounded me again." Bella swallowed. "The third time was the worst. I was fifteen, and a friend of mine caught me lurking around the moonpool acting, as she put it, 'loopy and a little mean.'" She let out a small chuckle that quickly faded. "The unspoken conclusion was that there was alcohol involved, and of course I was in no position to set anyone straight. My parents haven't really trusted me since then."

"Damn," Emma sympathized, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Yeah, it was tough. Actually, it was one of the reasons I filed for emancipation so I could move out on my own. I know it wasn't their fault, but the having them suspicious all the time just got to me. You know? Plus, it was getting harder and harder to keep the secret. And I knew it was hurting them too. I just...thought it was the best thing for everyone."

"Do you keep in touch at all?"

"Yeah. We talk on the phone about once a week or so. I tried my best to make it clear that I still loved them, and I think they're believing it more and more now, even though they still don't completely understand."

"Wow!" Emma breathed. "It's amazing you're not depressed or anything. Rikki and Cleo always told me how much of a positive person you are."

"Well, moving to Australia had a lot to do with that. Just about the time when it probably would've pushed me over the edge is when I met Rikki, Cleo, and Will. I don't know, they...gave me a sense of belonging, I guess. I didn't know how bad I needed it before I came here, but now, I wouldn't trade their friendship and camaraderie for anything!"

"Neither would I," Emma smiled. "And now you have me too!" she added in an attempt to lighten the mood.

Bella smiled back. "Thanks! And I'm sorry for dumping all that on you," she chuckled. "I haven't even told Will all the sordid details yet."

"No, I'm sorry for bringing it up!" Emma furrowed her brow at the last statement. "And of course you haven't told Will. You'd have to tell him you're a mermaid first."

The response was a confused narrowing of the eyes. "He already knows. He found out a while back."

"What?"

Bella's eyes widened. "Oh, crap! Cleo and Rikki didn't tell you?"

"No, they conveniently left that part out!"

A sheepish grimace followed, blended with what the wearer hoped was a reassuring smile. "He's been a big help in dealing with everything and keeping it all secret, if that helps."

Emma's face softened as she closed her eyes for a moment to absorb this bit of information. "Well, if Rikki and Cleo trust him,...

"Which they do."

"Fine. I guess I can live with that." A heavy sigh escaped her lips. "But wait! Does he know I'm a mermaid too?"

Bella shook her head. "I don't think so. I don't think Cleo and Rikki would've told him without your approval, and they would've had to tell you he knows in order to ask you, which they obviously didn't. Plus, he only knows about you second-hand through me, and I don't recall ever mentioning it. I'm pretty sure all he knows is that you're a good friend of Rikki and Cleo who went off traveling for a year."

"Good. I'm probably going to tell him anyway, 'cause there doesn't seem to be much point in hiding it from him. Even so, I'd like it to be on my own terms."

**\*\*A/N:** Firstly, I am SO sorry for taking ages to update, but I spent a fair portion of the intervening month playing Elmer Fudd to my muse's Bugs Bunny. The chapter took on a life of its own in certain parts. For example, I never intended to delve into Zane's psyche in the beginning, and Lewis was originally involved but ended up getting written out halfway through. The bit about Bella being an emancipated minor popped into my head as a possible explanation for the conspicuous absence of the elder Hartleys on the show. Constructive critique is welcome, especially regarding characterization.\*\*

### 3. Chapter 3

**\*\*H2O: A Summer's Tail**

><strong>**\*\*By Jeune Ecrivain**

>Chapter 3<br>**A/N:** So sorry for taking so long! I got distracted by the upgrade to some of my favorite software. It has a bit more of a learning curve than I expected. I'm really going to try to update more regularly now, so please stay tuned! I hope you enjoy this installment! The next one should be longer.  
><strong>

"I know what you want, Ronnie, but I can't. People might see."

The dolphin in question responded only with another series of squeaks and clicks, which Cleo was finding harder and harder to resist. This was one of those times she could swear there was a genuine language behind the cetacean vocal repertoire, complete with grammar and syntax. The sentience with which those beady yet innocent eyes looked up at her as he reiterated his invitation like an ever-hopeful child only served to make it all the more endearing.

Still, even though she was technically on break, she could be easily spotted by tourists passing by on their way to other attractions. It was too risky. "I was here bright and early this morning just to go swimming with you," she reminded her aquatic partner with an apologetic smile. "That's just going to have to be enough for a while."

"I think you've spoiled him," came a voice from behind.

Cleo turned to find Rikki seated lazily on the second tier of the otherwise deserted bleachers. "You try working with a friendly dolphin every day. I'll bet it wouldn't be long before even you gave in at least once." As had recently become her habit, she picked up a beach ball from the ground near the pool and sent it sailing over the pool, chuckling as Ronnie sprung out from beneath the gentle waves at precisely the right moment to use his bottlenose as a built-in tennis racket.

Stepping half-backwards, she caught the rebounding ball on the way up to join her human friend and tossed it again just as her butt met the bench. "Even people who can't grow tails like swimming with the dolphins. How could anyone expect us mermaids to be any better at saying no?"

Rikki ventured a glance Ronnie playing catch in a way that vaguely reminded her of an American movie about a basketball-playing dog. "I suppose it'd be a shame to waste an excuse like that," she replied with a small smile.

"I've been trying to swim more with him while I still can," admitted a wistful Cleo. "In a few short months, we'll be off to university, and it'll all be over." A soft sigh escaped her lips as she caught the ball and tossed it for the umpteenth time. "Even if I come home for holiday, I won't have my job anymore, and it'll be much harder without employee clearance."

"You have to sneak around because you're literally half-fish anyway. What's the difference?"

"Half-cetacean, actually."

"Huh?"

"Fish have vertical tails and swim by moving it from side to side. We have horizontal tails and swim by undulating our spines up and down, like whales and dolphins. Also, fish have gills and can actually breathe underwater instead of just holding their breath for a really long time. Technically, the only thing fishy about us is the fact that we have scales."

The response was a smug grin followed by a nod. "Yep. You've definitely been dating Lewis for too long. He's officially turned you into a nerd. I guess you're both whipped now."

Cleo elbowed Rikki in the side. "Shut up."

The blonde only chuckled in reply. "You don't even mind that he's infected you with his nerdiness, do you?"

The brunette responded with a roll of her eyes. "He didn't infect me with anything! Someone had to fill in for him while he was away in the States, so I just kind of slid into it, and once I did, I found out I liked it."

"Please. You started down that slippery slope before he ever left and it's only gotten more obvious now that he's back. Have you even noticed that you seem to wear those glasses of yours more often when he's around?"

Cleo's cheeks flushed, but she was otherwise unfazed. "Of course I have! That has nothing to do with me being nerdy. That's just me having a little fun."

Rikki looked genuinely confused. "Fun? So it's not a subconscious thing?"

"Nope. Apparently, my glasses really turn him on, so I just like to tease him sometimes."

The blonde gave her a proud smirk. "Alright, I can get behind that. But you're still a nerd."

"Fair enough."

A pause followed during which the only sounds were the rhythmic bip and bop of the ball going back and forth between Cleo and Ronnie. Finally, Rikki piped up. "What time do we need to be at the airport next Thursday to meet Emma again?"

"Her flight comes in at 2:40," answered Cleo. "It'll be so nice to have her back and have all of us together again. I'm so glad we worked it out so we can all go to the same university too. If we hadn't, the timing couldn't have been worse!  
>We'd all be reunited only for a few months before we'd probably end up scattered across the country."<p>

"Yeah, that would've sucked. But on the other hand, that probably wouldn't have happened if Emma hadn't gone globetrotting to begin with."

"True." The observation sparked a memory of that pivotal conversation with Lewis. He had not been very keen on Emma's extended trip in the first place, concerned about there being no one else traveling along with her who knew her secret and could thus help prevent any accidental exposure. Naturally, the entire group agreed with the essence if not the intensity of his misgivings, but there was simply no feasible way out of it. Emma had promised repeatedly to be very careful and had done her best to appear more confident than she was. Nevertheless, crossed fingers and baited breath had accompanied the hugs and tears at her departure. They could all see the unspoken apprehension that lingered in each other's eyes. Their only consolation was that those most likely to discover the secret were her loving family, who would undoubtedly protect her despite their shock if they did find out.

Still, complete relief would not come until Emma was safely back in town, and their anxiety would only be exacerbated by a few close calls of which she kept her friends informed via telephone. When Ash had called to report on Emma's behalf that an abrupt rainstorm had nearly revealed all to the other Gilberts, Lewis had finally broached the question that had been bugging him for quite a while: wouldn't scattering across the country (and potentially the world) to different universities present most of the same dangers? That very evening, an impromptu conference call had carried long into the night, and the end result was the agreement that they needed to stay together as much as possible. In a way, it was not a hard decision. A certain part of each one of them welcomed a valid excuse to cater their college plans towards avoiding what would have undoubtedly been a bittersweet parting of ways.

Cleo was brought out of her reminiscences by the ring of her cell phone. She drew it from the pocket obscured by the sash of her pirate-wench costume and found a text message waiting for her. "It's from Bella," she told Rikki. "She wants us to meet her at the cafÃ© ASAP."

~~~~~CLEWISZIKKIEMMASHWILLA~~~~~

Lewis met Cleo and Rikki on their way to the cafÃ©, having received his own text message from Bella. Greeting his girlfriend with a customary kiss, he reported that he knew no more than they did about the motive for Bella's summons. The possibility that they would be meeting the new owner provoked equal measures of enthusiasm and

nervousness. The latter emotion faded quickly, however, when they stepped through the open door to find not Zane but Ash leaning against the counter beaming at them.

"Ash!" Cleo cried, rushing up to give him a hug, barely noticing Bella seated on a stool next to him. "Welcome back! We were wondering when you'd show up, considering Emma's due back soon!"

Ash accepted a hug from Rikki and a warm handshake from Lewis. "Thanks! It's great to be back, and I actually come bearing news!"

"All good, I hope," said Lewis.

"Well..." Ash lifted the hinged barrier built into the counter and stepped behind it..."...I have good news, I have bad news, and I have better news."

"Do we have a choice as to the order?" asked Rikki.

"Not really."

"You suck."

"I think you'll get over it."

Cleo turned to Bella. "What's going on?"

"I'll be the one making the announcements!" Ash interjected before she could respond. "First off: the good news. You are looking at the proud new owner of Rikki's Café!"

Rikki's jaw dropped. "What? How?"

"I basically used the final exam in one of my business classes as a proposal to get a loan from the bank."

Lewis looked impressed. "Are you serious? They actually gave you the money?"

"Yep. I made Zane an offer last week."

"Wow!" marveled Cleo. "That's awesome! We were worried some tycoon would snatch the place up and turn it into a cheap malt shop or something."

"Not on my watch," the male brunette declared. "Anyway, on to the bad news."

"Can't we have a moment to enjoy the good news before you ruin it?" Rikki whined.

"No."

"I'll say it again. You suck."

"You'll thank me," he smirked before giving a fake sigh of dejection. "As I was saying, the bad news is that Emma won't be coming home when she originally said."

The fiery blonde glared. "That's just unacceptable."

"Yeah, Ash! What the hell?" Cleo agreed. "We've been looking forward to next Thursday for ages!"

Lewis crossed his arms, sharing the girls' disappointment. "What happened?" he asked simply.

Ash resisted the urge to smile as he looked over their shoulders to see Emma emerging from her hiding place behind one of the booths near the entrance. "Well, that actually brings me to the better news. You see, the reason she's not coming home next Thursday is because..."

"I'm already here!"

All three newcomers turned to find Emma leaning against the front door with a warm smile on her face.

"EMMA!"

Despite the instant grin on his face, Lewis stumbled and instantly regretted having stood so close to the now-ecstatic girls, who raced like a cannonball over to their long-lost companion.

For her part, Emma eagerly let herself be engulfed by her friends' embrace. "Oh, my God! I missed you both so much! I'm never going away for that long again!"

"Damn right, you're not!" agreed Cleo. "We missed you too much to do it again!"

Rikki withdrew just long enough to glare at her returned comrade. "If you ever so much as try to leave on a trip that long again, I swear I will hunt you down and drag you all the way back with my bare hands!" Her stern pretense crumbled even as she finished, and she renewed the embrace.

The only brunette of the trio finally managed to peek out of the three-way hug to find her boyfriend massaging his eardrum with his knuckle. "Lewis, get in here!"

"Yeah, just give me a sec for my ears to stop bleeding."

#### 4. Chapter 4

\*\*H2O: A Summer's Tail  
><strong>\*\*Chapter 4\*\*

While a joyous reunion proceeded at the caf  , Will and Elliot had half-consciously migrated to the nearby beach, where they now walked along the edge of the tide discussing the proverbial nuts and bolts of competitive diving.

"So you actually hyperventilate on purpose?"

Will put his hands in his pockets and nodded. "Yeah. If you keep it under control, hyperventilating is actually good for your circulation when you're underwater. You have to be careful, though, 'cause if you



overdo it, you could end up blacking  
>out on your way back up."<p>

He looked at Elliot's face to gauge his reaction to this new detail. A mild widening of the eyes indicated an appropriate rise in attentiveness, but no undue intimidation seemed apparent.

"Why?"

"Well, basically, the deeper you go the more pressure there is on your lungs, and by the time you start back up, the urge to inhale is considerable. So alot of divers instinctively go up a little faster than they came down, but that means that the pressure on your lungs drops pretty fast. If it drops too fast, it's lights out for you."

"Can you drown?"

"Not if you have a buddy to monitor you, which is pretty much mandatory. In fact, they almost always prefer that you have two: one on a boat at the surface and the other in scuba gear below. They also have to be trained in first aid. I haven't signed up for anything yet that didn't disqualify you if you didn't have at least one, so they take the risk pretty seriously."

Elliot considered this. "So it's kind of like having a spot when you're lifting weights?"

Will blinked, impressed at the accuracy of the analogy.

"Exactly!"

The younger boy nodded. "Well, I definitely want to get into swimming at school. I'm not sure about diving yet, but if I do give it a try sometime, will you be my buddy?"

The older boy smiled and gave a nod of his own. "Why not? I could use something to help keep me busy over the summer, anyway. I've been looking into maybe getting a job as a lifeguard, but I'll be leaving for university in a few months, and the people I've spoken to are all looking for a more permanent arrangement."

"What university?"

"Melbourne."

"That's where my sister's going!"

Will was genuinely surprised. "Well, that's cool! At least she won't have to say goodbye to Cleo and Rikki again."

"Ash, too. He's already in the business school there."

"Nice."

"Yeah, he really seems to like my sister."

The response on Will's tongue was silenced by a third voice. "Well, I'm glad you approve."

The two boys turned to find Emma standing nearby with crossed arms

and a smirk on her face. "So what have you guys been up to?"

"Will was just telling me some stuff about free-diving," her brother replied.

She narrowed her eyes. "Think you might try it?"

Elliot shrugged. "I'm not ruling it out."

"Cool," Emma nodded her approval. "Anyway, Cleo finally had to go back to work, but Ash is just about ready to drive us home so we can start unpacking. We're all getting together after Cleo's shift ends for a little reunion party!" She faced Will. "You and Bella are invited too, of course."

He gave her a lopsided smile. "Wouldn't miss it."

"Great! Anyway, nice meeting you again." She motioned for Elliot to follow her, and the two Gilberts exchanged a final wave with the older boy before making their way to the café parking lot.

~~~~~CLEWISEMMASHZIKKIWILLA~~~~~

Will slid down the short natural tunnel that led to the underground cave with practiced ease. The trip had become so familiar that it hardly surprised him anymore how gentle the rocky slope was. Nor did the fact that what greeted him at the other end so uncannily resembled a set of three stone steps give him much pause. Then again, with the secret knowledge that mermaids are more than mere myth, perhaps that was to be expected. In any case, it was his turn to check on the status of the underground cave and its mysterious pool, and he had decided to take this opportunity to do so before the get-together at the Gilbert residence.

He stepped into the main chamber and gave a small smile of satisfaction. The debris of the explosion that had nearly cost the pool's comet-deflection capabilities had long been cleared away. After appraising Lewis of the dramatic events that had immediately preceded his return to Gold Coast, the mermaids and their male companions had moved quickly to gather all of the enigmatic blue mineral that had been released from the basaltic walls and stash it away in Will's boathouse. Once that had been accomplished, they still had to tend to the crystals that remained fast within the walls yet exposed by a slab of surface rock having been cut away. Will smiled as he recalled the cleverness of Lewis and Bella's solution.

Using her hydrokinetic powers, Cleo grafted a glob of water onto the exposed area, making it purposely lumpy. Bella then gelatinized it, giving it just the right viscosity so that Lewis could texture it by repeatedly pressing a piece of the native stone into it. She then thickened it further to the point of solidity, and the result was painted black. It was makeshift, to be sure, but it would at least prevent the azure minerals which lay underneath from arousing any curiosity until a more permanent fix could be found. In the meantime, they all took turns making sure it remained intact and convincing, at least to the untrained eye.

As he was focused on applying careful pressure to the faux-basaltic patch, testing its strength, Will failed to notice a content Emma

surface beneath the rocky ledge that served as a natural awning over the mouth of the moonpool. She immediately froze and cloaked herself in the shadow of the ledge. When a brief turn of his head allowed her to recognize him, her relief was all too brief. As she was about to reveal herself, the approaching sound of an unknown voice caused her to retreat once more. Apparently hearing the intruder at the same instant, Will turned his head towards the terrestrial entrance and waited only a few seconds before a young woman with long, curly hair and blue eyes. Clad in a fashionably worn-looking tank top, shorts, and flannel over-shirt, she stopped in her tracks as she spotted Will. Close behind her, a dark-haired man who turned out to be Zane caught the blonde male's eye.

"Hey, mate," said the female newcomer with a friendly smile as she strode confidently into the cave. "This place isn't particularly easy to just stumble upon, so are you here for a reason or are you just lucky?"

Zane jumped in. "This is Will. He's a free-diver, and this is one of his favorite spots to train. Right, mate?"

Will just nodded and replied with a half-smile. "Yeah. It's sort of a secret, though, and I'd like to keep it that way."

"No worries. I don't exactly want the whole town snooping around here myself. Heck, the only reason I let him tag along..." She gestured towards Zane. "...was because he treated me to a nice picnic on the beach and wouldn't take no for an answer after I told him where I was going next." She looked all around the cave and smiled in satisfaction before turning back to Will. "So you're a diver, eh?"

Will narrowed his eyes and nodded. "Yep."

She put her hands on her hips, bringing attention to her frame's similarity to Rikki's, and looked him over from head to toe. "I could take you," she decided with an impish gleam in her eye.

Will cocked an eyebrow. "You dive?"

"You bet, though for me, it's more of a means to an end. I'm technically an actress, but my specialty involves a lot of swimming and diving. Still, with all the training I've had, I could probably compete with the best of 'em if I really wanted to. And since he obviously isn't going to introduce me..." She threw a pointed look at Zane and extended her hand. "Reggie Frisbey, professional mermaid."

His eyes widened for a fleeting instant as he shook her hand. "Nice to meet you."

"Likewise."

Shoving his hands into his pockets, Will assumed a casual persona. "So, what brings you to Mako Island?" As Reggie momentarily broke eye contact and knelt down before the moonpool, he took the opportunity to throw a pointed glare of his own at his darker-haired comrade. \_Really, Zane?\_

"Well..." she said, oblivious to the looks being exchanged between

the two young men, "...aside from playing mermaids in plays and stuff, I'm also a bit of a guru when it comes to the mythology. I even have a website that's basically an encyclopedia on myths about merpeople from around the world. You should check it out. Fascinating stuff, if I do say so myself." She idly placed a few fingers into the azure water and sent a few ripples across its surface before rising to her feet again. "This place has been the epicenter of Australian mermaid sightings ever since the first colonists arrived, and the Aborigines even had a few tales to tell before that." A chuckle escaped her lips. "I don't actually believe in the stuff, of course, but I am curious as to how so many sightings could be explained."

"Well, they're probably all dolphins or whales or something," suggested Will.

"True, but still, there has to be a reason why so many cases of mistaken identity are concentrated in this area. I've wanted to come here for quite a while, but I could never quite work it out until now. I'm looking forward to a whole summer of digging!"

The male blonde nodded and plastered a smile on his face.  
"Great!"

Reggie smirked and glanced at her watch. "Crap! I gotta go. I wanted to stop by the marine park, and it's closing soon." She turned to Zane. "I'll see you around?"

He nodded. "Sure."

"Great. Do you need a ride back to the mainland?"

"I got 'im," Will interjected before Zane could answer, throwing him another discrete glare.

Reggie nodded and disappeared into the tunnel that had brought her there. "Great meeting you!" her voice sounded for the last time.

"You too! Will called back before turning his narrowed eyes back to Zane.

"Don't start," said the brunette.

Still unseen by the two young men, Emma was about to make her presence known and pounce on Zane when Will beat her to it. "What the hell's going on?"

"Look, she showed up at the cafÃ© the day before the official closing. Said she was a student from Melbourne on summer holiday. We got to talking, and I decided, hey, I had to start moving on somewhere, so I asked her out." He ignored his friend's scoff. "I didn't know about her job until after I'd asked her, and I just found out about her research a couple hours ago! That's when I asked if I could come along." Intercepting the impending retort, he quickly added, "I made sure she has no clue about my real motives. She thinks I'm just taking a quirky interest in her hobby, I swear."

"You're sure?"

"Positive."

Will shook his head, still uncertain. "I don't know, Zane. If she gets a clue, who knows what could happen to the girls? The last thing I want is for them to wind up locked up like lab rats."

"Hey, I don't want that anymore than you do, believe me! But haven't you ever heard of keeping your friends close and your enemies closer?" Zane said. "We need someone who can keep tabs on what she knows without it being suspicious. Maybe even throw her off track with some false leads or something. I can do that, Will. I saw a potential threat, I saw an opportunity to do something about it, and I took it." He stepped forward with a dejected sigh. "Believe it or not, I'm just trying to look out for the girls. I know I've stuffed that up in the past, but I do still care about them."

As Will paused to consider Zane's words, Emma took the opportunity to finally announce herself. She cleared her throat, which turned both male heads immediately in her direction. She swam quietly into view and spoke. "I believe you, Zane."

"Emma..."

Will's jaw went slack for a few seconds before his expression morphed into one of easy acceptance. He put his hands on his hips and chuckled. "I'm guessing this is why you had to quit the swim team."

Emma gave him a small smile and nodded before turning her attention to the matter at hand. "Look, we should definitely talk it over with the others at my house tonight, but based on what I overheard, I think Zane has a point. We can't let her find out anything, and our best shot at making sure that doesn't happen is to have a double agent." She gave a sigh of her own. "I should probably get back home. I just had to see the moonpool for myself real quick, so I left Elliot with Rikki and Ash. Cleo's shift ends soon, so try not to be late. We have a lot to talk about."

**\*\*A/N:** Rest easy, Zikki fans. Zane's relationship with Reggie won't get far. In fact, it may very well be Reggie who eventually helps push him and Rikki back together. I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and even if you didn't, feel free to let me know why in a review!\*\*

End  
file.